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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a study of the writing performance of superior twelfth graders and college English majors in three types of discourse: expressive, explanatory, and persuasive. The primary purpose of the study is descriptive, though the results of the descriptive analysis will permit a comparison of twelfth graders' writing with college students' writing. The descriptive analysis is designed to define separately expressive, explanatory, and persuasive discourse according to three kinds of structural patterns: syntax, cognitive strategies, and larger rhetorical patterns. The writing tasks used are arranged into the three major discourse categories; the tasks within each of the categories present the writer with varied audiences and topics. It is anticipated that both the careful differentiation of writing contexts presented in the tasks and the comprehensive structural analysis will culminate in empirically based and generalizable definitions of student writing performance in three types of discourse. It is also anticipated that the study will yield information about the relationship between maturity and discourse type. (Author/AA)

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Syntax, Intellectual Strategies, and Larger Rhetorical Patterns in the Writing of Superior Twelfth Graders and College English Majors in Three Discourse Categories: Expressive, Explanatory, and Persuasive

Prepared for the 1977 Annual Meeting of the American Education Research Association, New York City, N.Y.

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The Problem

> "...it is probably in the school that the global view of writing has its most insidious and powerful effects."
> (James Britton, et al, 1975)

As teachers and researchers, we cannot afford to conceive of the writing process as an undifferentiated language activity whose product--the written text--can be judged "good" or "bad," regardless of the context and purpose of the communication. If we are to become better teachers and evaluators of writing (with the popular press exclaiming that we must), we need to lay our "globalist" assumptions aside for a time. In the midst of our prescribing, we must pause to describe systematically and objectively those factors which seem to tie the written product to the writing context.

Recent research in both oral and written language performance, which informs the first section of this study, lends concrete support to the idea that context (audience, purpose, and topic) plays an important role in shaping the language product. Jensen (1973) found that fifth graders signficiantly ($p < .05$) differentiate their oral language use between the two style categories of "casual" and "careful" speech. Casual language displayed greater lexical diversity, fewer examples of non-standard usage, and a greater variety of syntactic patterns, while careful language was characterized by a higher incidence of garbles, longer clauses, and a higher subordination ratio.

Rosen (1969) found that a widely used global measure of written syntactic maturity, the "T-unit," lost its reliability when he applied it to compositions written for systematically specified functions. Comparing his results to Kellogg Hunt's normative maturity scores (1965), he discovered that his 15/16-year-old writers' syntactic fluency varied more widely from one function category to another than Hunt's eighth graders' fluency differed from twelfth graders'.

Both the Jensen and Rosen studies demonstrate that syntactic choices are influenced in measurable ways by rhetorical context. The implications for composition instruction and evaluation should not be taken lightly. Any attempt to judge a student's linguistic competence or "maturity" should be based on a sample which opens up as many communication contexts as possible. Furthermore, having secured such a sample, one should refrain from making overly general statements about linguistic maturity, since syntactic fluency seems to be as closely bound to style (or function) as it is to age. In other words, we cannot afford to label a student as a poor writer until we have examined his/her performance under differing rhetorical constraints. And if we find that this student is, in general, a less mature writer than his/her peers, but that when it comes to, say, expressive writing, he/she is markedly more fluent than many peers, we cannot feel comfortable with a global evaluation.

In undertaking this first section of the study, I propose to sort out variations in students' written language to discover

two things--how the rhetorical context presented in the task effects syntactic patterns, and how maturity effects syntactic patterns. Since all the participants in this study--both high school seniors and upper level college English majors--are superior writers, their collective linguistic profiles will portray the ideal writer's syntactic patterns. And since their writing will be classified according to both age and discourse type, it will be possible to discover whether or not the ideal writer's syntactic fluency fluctuates as much from discourse type to discourse type as it does from one age level to another. This picture should add detail to the larger, less specified picture we get through the global application of syntactic maturity measures.

Just as the syntactic picture needs to be filled out, the language features which extend beyond syntax need to be carefully described. When a writing analysis is confined to syntax, its ability to break the sentence boundary is quite limited. It can tell us how two contiguous sentences relate to each other syntactically if markers of subordination or coordination appear in the surface structure. But it cannot tell us much about the more pervasive patterns which subsume sentences. Therefore, other measures capable of projecting outside syntax should should accompany syntactic analysis if we are to develop a more complete image of whole pieces of discourse.

The two measures which accompany syntactic analysis in this study project beyond syntax in two different directions.

The first, an analysis of intellectual strategies, relates surface structure cues to the writer's cognitive processes. The second, a rhetorical analysis grounded in speech acts theory, classifies sentences and groups of sentences according to the perlocutionary acts the writer engages in to achieve a rhetorical purpose. Various combinations of perlocutionary acts like stating, promising, questioning, predicting, threatening, etc., may be enlisted to gain the different rhetorical ends of explanatory, expressive, and persuasive discourse.

My use of these two measures in this study is exploratory. In employing them, I will be engaged both in analysis of written language and in a continuing definition and refinement of the measures. With the intellectual strategies, I will examine the surface structure markers of focus, contrast, classification, change, sequence, and reference to physical context (Odell, 1972) in order to discover to what extent the six categories duplicate syntactic analysis and to what extent they are independent of syntax.

With the speech acts analysis, I will be following Larson's lead (1967) in describing the linear movement of written texts--a movement characterized by the successive perlocutionary acts the writer engages in. In using Larson's approach, I will be particularly concerned with how well a linear view develops into a discrete, holistic picture of writing in the independently defined discourse categories.

In summary, this study is an attempt to move beyond existing descriptions of, and impressions about, "good" writing. The

examination of syntactic fluency is aimed at clarifying the relationship syntactic maturity and syntactic variations which might be bound to the purpose of a writing task. Moving outside sentence structure, the analyses of intellectual strategies and speech acts also provide means of differentiating student writing on the basis of maturity and discourse purpose. I enlist all three measures in the cause of dispelling the globalist assumption that writing is, after all, "just writing." I suggest instead that learning to write consists of learning to master different kinds of writing and that a student who is the master of one may not be the master of all.

Method

Selection of Subjects. Two age-groups of superior student writers will be selected for this study. All subjects participating in this study are part of a larger investigation being conducted in the Buffalo area by Charles R. Cooper, Cynthia Courts, and Lee Odell of the State University of New York at Buffalo. From two Buffalo area high schools come the 15 high school seniors, who make up the first age group. The second group--15 college junior and senior English majors--will be selected from an experimental composition course taught by a member of the Department of Instruction at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

To insure that the high school students selected for this study are indeed superior writers, I will employ a three-step

selection procedure. First, the students' verbal I.Q. scores must fall within the 115-125 range. Second, they must be informally rated "above average writers" by their composition instructors. And third, the writing (four pieces in each discourse type) these students have done for the Buffalo Cross-sectional Study of Writing Performance must be rated "superior" in at least one discourse type by a group of experienced composition teachers. In order to arrive at their "superior" ratings, these experienced teachers will use a primary trait scoring procedure (Lloyd-Jones, in press) designed for each discourse type. With the help of these scoring guides, each rater will sort the 60 papers in each discourse category into three groups: "Superior," "Average," and "Low."

The selection of college level writers will follow somewhat the same procedure. Since the State University at Buffalo admits only students in the top 12% of their graduating classes, these students have already been selected on the basis of generally superior academic performance. Further, since upper level English majors have had frequent and varied writing experiences in the past three to four years, I am assuming that they constitute an even more highly verbal subsample. Based on the instructor's informal judgment and the primary trait ratings, 15 students will be selected from the group of 20 students presently participating in the study.

Presentation of the Writing Tasks. Each student's written responses to the twelve writing tasks will be the product of a

three-step procedure. First, after the students receive a task, their teacher will involve the class in a short pre-writing activity. This activity may range from informal discussion to role-playing to the use of heuristic guides. Immediately following the pre-writing activity, students will write a first draft. The third step, the writing of the final draft, will take place after a two or three-day "rest" period. At no time during the composing process will the teacher intervene. Students will, however, be encouraged to seek feedback and editing help from their peers prior to their writing of the final drafts.

Coordination of the Writing Tasks. The tasks (see Appendix), which are part of the Buffalo Cross-sectional Study of Writing Performance, were designed so that each task at the high school level parallels a college level task according to two main criteria of similarity:

1. Topic
    a. level of abstraction called for
    b. familiarity to the writer
2. Audience
    a. psychological distance from the writer
    b. physical distance from the writer

As a result, the four tasks in each of the three categories are governed not only by similarity of purpose (i.e., expression, persuasion, or explanation) but also by the similarity of topic and audience constraints put upon both the high school and college

writers. In the Appendix the writing tasks for both groups are ordered so that, for example, Explanatory Task #1 (Grade 12) presents a topic and audience parallel to Explanatory Task #1 (college), and so on throughout the three categories.

Analysis

Syntax. All compositions will be marked into T-units (one main clause plus all elements embedded into it). An averaged mean T-unit score will be calculated for each writer's entire corpus (12 pieces) and for each writer's compositions in the three separate discourse categories (four pieces per category). One group mean for the collective corpus and three group means for the discourse types will then be computed for the 15 twelfth graders and for the 15 English majors.

The various syntactic operations to be studied fall under the general headings of embedding and conjoining transformations. In examining the products of embedding transformations, I will be looking at mean clause length, subordination ratio, the proportionate uses and varying functions of noun, adjective, and adverb clauses, and the proportionate uses of structures resulting from subordinate clause reduction (both single-word and phrasal modifiers). In addition, I will separately compute the frequency of a certain type of reduced clauses, which Christensen (1967) has called "free modifiers." The examination of conjoining transformations will focus on coordination both between and within T-units. The syntactic

operations listed here represent only a small set of all possible operations. The selectivity of this list is, in part, informed by recent work done by Cooper and Rosenberg (1975).

The following are selected hypotheses I will be testing in this section of the study:

1. There is a significantly higher incidence of between-T-unit coordination in expressive discourse than in either of the other two types.

2. The functions of adverb clauses are significantly different between explanatory and persuasive discourse. Clauses of cause, consequence, and concession dominate persuasive discourse while clauses of temporal and logical sequence dominate explanatory discourse.

3. Mean clause length is significantly shorter and subordination ratio significantly lower in expressive discourse than in the other two discourse types.

Intellectual Strategies. All compositions will be analyzed for surface structure cues to the six cognitive operations of focus, contrast, classification, change, sequence, and reference to physical context. Some of the cues which mark each operation are:

Focus:	the varying grammatical subjects of clauses
Contrast:	negative transformations; lexical items indicating contrast, opposition, or inverse relationships, such as "against," "but," "however"

Classification:	labeling a subject NP as a member of a class by means of the S-Copula-NP sentence pattern; lexical items expressing shared characteristics, such as "like," "as," "same," "likewise"
Sequence (temporal and logical):	lexical items like "if...then," "when," "as a result," "first," "second"
Change:	single lexical items (usually verbs) or longer expressions which indicate the varying identities of a thing, person, or idea (e.g., "I'm going to be an English teacher when I graduate.")
Reference to Physical Context:	any lexical item which refers to the objects in the physical environment of the thing or person being written about in a given passage

The following are selected hypotheses I will be testing in this section of the study:

1. Persuasive discourse is characterized by a significantly higher proportion of sentences expressing a contrast which opposes a known reality to a hypothetical reality than is either explanatory or expressive discourse.

2. Expressive discourse will be characterized by a significantly higher incidence of sentences expressing internal change than is either explanatory or persuasive discourse.

3. Explanatory and persuasive discourse is characterized by a higher incidence of sentences expressing classification by explicit analogy, labeling, and exemplification than is expressive discourse.

Speech Acts Analysis. Each T-unit will be classified according to the perlocutionary act it performs. Likewise, the overriding perlocutionary act of each paragraph will be determined. This analysis, unlike syntax and intellectual strategies, will not employ frequency counts. Instead, its aim is to identify patterns and to determine by generalization a minimal pattern or set of patterns for each kind of discourse which is capable of generating the various sub-patterns different writers create in order to achieve the same rhetorical purpose.

In taking a preliminary look at some of my data, I have applied this analysis to a few expressive pieces written by seventeen-year-olds. Adapting and extending Larson's basic method, I have classified sentences and paragraphs according to the perlocutionary acts they perform. At this point I can very tentatively propose a minimal generative pattern for expressive discourse written in response to one task. Using transformational re-write rules, the pattern looks like this:

Minimal Expression → Defining "I"
Defining "You"
Relating "I" and "You"
Demanding

Defining "I" → {Plea / Request} for understanding
Expansion/Exemplification
Narration

Defining "You" → Identification with "You"
Describing "You"
Narration

Relating "I" and "You" → Stating Contrasts
Identifying Cause and Effect

Demanding → Unconditional Statement of Desire
Statement of Result

The subsequent analysis of other pieces of expressive discourse will be, in a sense, a test of the hypothesis that:

Minimal Expression ⟶ Defining "I"
Defining "You"
Relating "I" and "You"
Demand

The subsequent analysis of other pieces of expressive discourse will be a continuing test of the hypothesis that:

Minimal Expression ⟶ Defining "I"
Defining "You"
Relating "I" and "You"
Demanding

Hypothetical patterns for persuasion and explanation will also be synthesized and tested in this manner.

APPENDIX

A. Writing Tasks for Grade 12: Explanatory, Expressive, Persuasive

B. Writing Tasks for College English Majors: Explanatory, Expressive, Persuasive

(All tasks are part of the Buffalo Cross-sectional Study of Writing Performance currently being conducted by Cooper, Courts, and Odell.)

A. WRITING TASKS FOR GRADE 12

Explanatory Writing Tasks

1. Everybody knows of something that is worth talking about. Maybe you know about a famous place like Niagara Falls or the Toronto Science Center in Canada. Or you might know about a grape farm, a huge corn field, or a body of water like Lake Erie. Perhaps you have visited the Buffalo Zoo or Crystal Beach Amusement Park or the Albright-Knox Art Gallery.

   There is probably something you can describe. Choose something you know about. It might be something from around where you live, or something you have seen on a trip, or something you have learned about in school. Think about it for a while and then write a description of what it looks like. Pretend you are writing this description for another high school senior who has never seen the thing you have chosen. You'll want your description to be so clear that the other twelfth grader would be able to recognize the thing if he ever got the chance to see it for real.

2. About five years ago a group of explorers discovered a primitive tribe living in the jungles of the Philippines. This tribe, called the Tassadai, had been totally isolated from civilization's progress for many thousands of years. When they were found, they were living just like people of the Stone Age--in caves, with only a few crude tools for hunting and cooking.

   Imagine that you were with the expedition that found the Tassadai. After living with the tribe for several years, you decide to come back to the U.S., bringing with you a tribe member who has become a friend and has learned to speak English. Imagine what you would say and do to introduce him/her to modern civilization when you first arrive in the States. Try to give this person a really good sense of what life is like in the modern U.S.

3. Your parents are upset that you spend so much time away from home, hanging around with your friends. Although you and your family used to be very close when you were younger, you no longer do as many things together with them. One Saturday as you are getting ready to go to a movie with a group of kids, they ask you to tell them why you prefer your friends to your family. You tell them you don't have time to talk now but that later on you will try to write them a note giving your answer. Write the note explaining why you spend so much of your free time with your friends. Assume that your parents are not irritated or angry and are willing to listen to any good reasons you can present.

4. Imagine that a space visitor arrives from another planet and makes a study of the values of people in this culture. He does not understand the concept of competition at all--why people engage in it, and what it achieves. Since he must take an explanation to his superiors back home, he asks you to help him by ghost-writing his report. Write his report for him, explaining competition to the people in his society.

Expressive Writing Tasks

1. Think back to a time when something disappointed you so badly that you became extremely discouraged with yourself. Write about that time or incident telling what happened to discourage or disappoint you, what you thought about, and how you felt. Write this in the form of a letter to yourself, which you will seal and save to read again when you are 21 years old.

2. Your parents are very anxious for you to get good grades in school. Lately they have really been pushing you to do better. You're trying as hard as you can, but that doesn't seem to be enough. Finally, you can't take the pressure any more and you decide to tell them how you feel. Write down what you would say to your parents to help them understand how their pushing you makes you feel. Write down your feelings in the form of a note you will leave for them to read.

3. Everybody knows or can imagine what it is like to lose something or someone of special importance. Valuable things may be lost or broken, close friends or relatives may die or move away, favorite pets may be lost or killed.

   Think of some loss you have experienced. Tell what you especially remember about what you lost, and how it feels to experience such a loss. Write the piece for other students in your class to read.

4. It is the year 2376. You are a member of a scientific team which has built the ultimate computer. Capable of independent thought and spontaneous speech, XYLA-121 as it is called, seems far superior to humans in all logical matters. The first chance you get, you ask XYLA a question you've wondered about all your life: "Is there a God?" The answer rumbles forth from the voice chamber, "There is now." You feel you must include this information in a section of your research report, which will be read by many other scientists. As you rewrite about your experience, include both the details of what happened and of how you felt at the time.

Persuasive Writing Tasks

1. Pretend that the editor of your school newspaper has asked you to write an article about the "Athlete of the Year." The editor wants you to choose the person you would elect as "Athlete of the Year" and tell why that person should get the award. Remember that this outstanding athlete can be either a man or a woman. As you write about your choice, be sure to give as many good reasons for your choice as you can think of. You will be writing the article for other students at your school.

2. Some high school students have proposed converting an old house into a recreation center where young people might drop in evenings for talk and relaxation. Some local residents oppose the plan on the grounds that the center would depress property values in the neighborhood and attract undesirable types. A public hearing has been called. Write a brief speech that you would make supporting or opposing the plan. Remember to take only ONE point of view. Organize your arguments carefully and be as convincing as possible.

3. Imagine that you have just read a letter to the editor of TV Guide. The person who wrote the letter complained about all the violence on TV--cop shows, horror movies, even cartoons like Road Runner. He said that these shows are teaching young people how to be violent, and because of this the shows should be taken off the air. Think about this problem for awhile. Then write your own letter to the editor either agreeing or disagreeing with the man who wrote the protest letter. As you write, be sure to include as many sensible reasons as you can think of to support your opinion.

4. Your best friend's parents have always wanted him/her to go to college and have worked hard to save the money for his/her education. Your best friend, however, is not sure about college. What would you say to help your friend make up his/her mind. Write down what you would say; write as though you were actually talking to your friend.

B. WRITING TASKS FOR COLLEGE ENGLISH MAJORS

Explanatory Writing Tasks

1. In communicating, people describe things to each other all the time. Imagine you are talking with a casual classroom acquaintance--someone you do not know very well. Describe to this person something you have seen either in your travels or close to home. Assume that your listener has never seen this thing, which could be some tourist attraction, a famous landmark or building, a work of art, or a natural phenomenon like a lake or a field of wheat. Whatever you choose to write about, be sure your description is so clear that your casual listener would recognize the thing if he/she ever got the chance to see it for him/herself.

2. About five years ago a group of explorers discovered a primitive tribe living in the jungles of the Philippines. This tribe, called the Tassadai, had been totally isolated from civilization's progress for many thousands of years. When they were found, they were living just like people of the Stone Age--in caves, with only a few crude tools for hunting and cooking.

   Imagine that you were with the expedition that found the Tassadai. After living with the tribe for several years, you decide to come back to the U.S., bringing with you a tribe member who has become a friend and has learned English fluently. Imagine what you would say and do to introduce him/her to modern civilization when you first arrive in the States. Try to give this person a really good sense of what life is like in the modern U.S.

3. Think back to your freshman year, recalling what kind of person you were--what your values were, how you spent your time, what thoughts and feelings preoccupied you. Select one aspect of your character which has changed between your freshman year and now. Write about that change as if you were explaining it to one of your professors whom you have come to trust as a good friend and advisor.

4. From your experience as a television viewer, select either the very worst or the very best TV series you've seen. Describe the program, being sure to state specifically your reasons for being either positive or negative about the show. As you write, imagine you are reviewing the series for Media Review magazine, a relatively sophisticated journal. Actually write your review for publication in this journal.

Expressive Writing Tasks

1. Think back to an experience which was more fun, more exhilarating, or more hilarious than anything that ever happened to you. Try to recapture that moment in time, holding it in your mind now long enough to call up all the feelings and thoughts you had then. Recount the fullness of the incident for yourself, in writing.

2. Your parents are very anxious for you to get good grades in college. Lately they have really been pushing you to do better. You're trying as hard as you can, but that doesn't seem to be enough. Finally, you can't take the pressure any more and you decide to write a letter home, telling them how you feel. Write down what you would say to your parents to help them understand how their pushing you makes you feel.

3. The incredible pressures generated by final exams and final papers have widely varying effects on students. Describe how you personally respond to the strain of finals week. Include in your description how and why you act and feel the way you do at this time in the term. As you write this piece, imagine your audience to be a concerned older professor whom you trust and regard as an objective impartial advisor.

4. An education professor is compiling a volume of college students' recollections of elementary school. She has asked you to contribute to the collection, which will be published next fall by Random House. Recall a primary school incident which you think accurately represents your childhood feelings about school, and then write it up, keeping in mind that your audience is the general reading public. Keep your focus on your feelings about the incident.

Persuasive Writing Tasks

1. The editor of the campus student newspaper has asked you to write an article nominating a candidate for the "Most Outstanding Professor" award. Taking this task seriously, you write as clearly and persuasively as you know how. Remember that your audience is the entire student body, as well as the faculty.

2. At the place where you work, a woman has just quit her job, leaving vacant the company's only executive position ever held by a female. The board of directors has made it clear that a woman must replace her in order to fulfill an Affirmative Action quota. As a member of the Hiring Committee, it is your job to help choose a successor to the post.

   The only woman who has applied for the job is less qualified than two of the men she is competing with. Members of the Committee disagree about what should be done: some say hiring a woman is absolutely necessary for breaking down employment discrimination; others say hiring an unqualified person would be foolish as well as unfair to those working under the new executive.

   Write a statement which represents your position in the matter, making it as logical and persuasive as possible. You will be delivering this statement to your fellow committee members.

3. A local landlord, notorious for his exploitation of student tenants, refused to return your damage deposit when you gave him notice that you were moving out. He is withholding your $150 to pay for a damaged carpet. Besides the fact that the carpet was in terrible condition when you moved in, you were really depending on that money to get home on. Write a letter to the landlord trying to convince him that he should refund your deposit.

4. As a graduation gift, your parents have promised to finance a trip to Europe for you. However, when they find out that your traveling companion will be the person you've been dating for a year, they back down, refusing to contribute to an immoral relationship. You and your friend have been anticipating this trip for months, making detailed plans and buying camping equipment. Since your parents are already on their guard, deceiving them is out of the question. It's a touchy situation, but you feel strongly about their promise to you. Write a letter in which you attempt to get them to reconsider. You will have to be unusually persuasive.

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